

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today called for Saudi Arabia to release Mohammad Fahad al-Qahtani and Dr. Abdullah bin Hamad, leading Saudi human rights activists, from prison immediately and unconditionally.

“Along with other Commissioners, I had the honor during a recent USCIRF trip to Saudi Arabia to host a meeting with Mr. al-Qahtani, one of two founding members of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association (ACPRA), an independent human rights organization,” said Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, USCIRF’s Chair. “We had sought out Mr. al-Qahtani, one of Saudi Arabia’s most prominent human rights activists, for his assessment of the status of freedom of religion and conscience in the Kingdom. ACPRA has issued numerous reports on rights abuses in Saudi Arabia, submitted information to the U.N. Human Rights Council and other international human rights mechanisms, and has criticized Saudi ministries and officials for their alleged human rights violations.

Mr. al-Qahtani was courageous to meet with us directly after Saudi authorities interrogated him about his human rights activism. We are gravely concerned that just weeks after our meeting, Mr. al-Qahtani has received a harsh prison term,” continued Dr. Lantos Swett.

On March 9, the Riyadh Specialized Criminal Court sentenced Mr. al-Qahtani to 10 years in prison. Dr. Abdullah bin Hamad – ACPRA's other founder, received a five year sentence, plus six years of a previous sentence (for which the King had granted him a pardon). Both also were banned from travelling after they complete their prison terms. In addition, ACPRA was disbanded, its property confiscated, and its social media accounts terminated. Al-Qahtani and bin Hamad have used social media to promote human rights and discuss their trial.

The Court found both guilty of “breaking allegiance to and disobeying the ruler,” “undermining unity,” “questioning the integrity of officials,” “seeking to disrupt security,” and “inciting disorder by calling for demonstrations.” Because Saudi Arabia has no codified criminal law, judges have both wide discretion to apply their own interpretations of Islamic law and expansive sentencing powers.

“We had an informative visit to Saudi Arabia, but these sentences are a shocking step in the wrong direction, violating international law that prohibits arbitrary arrests and guarantees a fair trial. We welcome the State Department's concern that these two prominent Saudi human rights activists have been sentenced to prison. We also urge the Saudi government to immediately set these men free and allow them to continue their work through the ACPRA,” said Dr. Lantos Swett.

Since 2008, ACPRA has attempted to get formal recognition as an NGO by applying for a license from the state, but the request has never been granted. Nevertheless, the Saudi government has permitted ACPRA to operate unofficially since 2009. The National Society for Human Rights - established in 2004 by the late King Fahd - is the sole government-licensed

domestic human rights NGO in Saudi Arabia.

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